The Significance of Students:

Can Increasing "Student Voice" in Schools

Lead to Gains in Youth Development?

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The notion of "student voice," or a student role in the decision making and change

efforts of schools, has ewerged in the new millennium as a potential strategy for

improving the success of school reform efforts. Yet few studies have examined this

construct either theoretically or empirically. Grounded in a sociocultural perspective,

this article provides some of the first empirical data on youth participation in student

voice efforts by identifying how student voice opportunities appear to contribute to

"youth development" outcomes in young people. The article finds that student voice

activities can create meaningful experiences for youth that help to meet fundamental

developmental needs -especially for students who otherwise do not find meaning in

their school experiences. Specifically, this research finds a marked consistency in the

growth of agency, belonging and competence-three assets that are central to youth

development. While these outcomes were consistent across the students in this study, the

data demonstrate how the structure of student voice efforts and nature of adult/student

relations fundamentally influence the forms of youth development outcomes that emerge.

While many high schools have struggled with how to improve student

outcomes, few high schools have decided to go straight to the source and

ask the students. In the past few years, the term "student voice" increasingly

has been discussed in the school reform literature as a potential

avenue for improving both student outcomes and school restructuring

(including Carbonaro & Gamoran, 2002; Fielding, 2002; Mitra, 2003a;

Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). The term has gained increasing credence as a

construct that describes the many ways in which youth might have the

opportunity to actively participate in school decisions that will shape their

lives and the lives of their peers (Fielding, 2001; Goodwillie, 1993; Levin,

2000). When placed into practice, "student voice" can consist on the most

basic level of youth sharing their opinions of problems and potential

solutions. It could also entail young people collaborating with adults to

actually address the problems in their schools.

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The concept of student voice is not new to education. In the sixties and

seventies, student power movements asserted the right of students to

participate in decision making in classrooms and schoolwide (such as Cusick,

1972, deCharms, 1976). Yet a focus on the role of students in school decision

making and culture largely vanished after the mid seventies (Levin, 2000).

During the past few decades, efforts to improve schools have taken center

stage across the nation, but youth rarely become involved in school reform in

the United States,1 despite the fact that many reforms are intended to create

more equitable and engaging educational programs for students (Muncey &

McQuillan, 1991; Olsen, Jaramillo, McCall-Perez, & White, 1999).

During this time when student voice remained mostly silent in schools,

many adolescents experienced increasing alienation as a result of large school

and class sizes, segregation by age and ability that can prevent students from

learning from more experienced peers, and a view of students as clients that

is often perpetuated throughout school decision making and thereby

increases the distance between teachers and students (Costello, Toles,

Spielberger, & Wynn, 2000; Nieto, 1994; Pittman & Wright, 1991; Soohoo,

1993). Students report that adults in their schools rarely listen to their views,

nor do they involve students in important decisions affecting their own

activities or work (Noddings, 1992; Poplin & Weeres, 1992). This alienation

results in large numbers of high-school students who describe their school

experiences in terms of anonymity and powerlessness (Heath & McLaughlin,

1993, Nightingale & Wolverton, 1993; Pope, 2001; Sizer, 1984). These

systemic problems can contribute to youth disengaging from school and lead

to increasing numbers of students who cut classes, have lower self-concepts,

achieve less academically, and drop out of school (Fullan, 2001; Rudduck,

Day, & Wallace, 1997).

"Student voice" has reemerged on the educational landscape in the

United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom in the past decade. The

focus has not been geared to rights and empowerment as it had in the past,

but instead it has focused on the notion that student outcomes will improve

and school reform will be more successful if students actively participate in

shaping it. In its present form, student voice activities range from schools

gathering information from students through focus groups and surveys to

students working alongside teachers to develop and implement strategies

for school improvement.

The existing research suggests that this new form of student voice has

served as a catalyst for change in schools, including helping to improve

teaching, curriculum, and teacher-student relationships and leading to

changes in student assessment and teacher training (Fielding, 2001; Mitra,

2003; Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Partnering with students

to identify school problems and possible solutions reminds teachers and

administrators that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives

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about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate (Kushman, 1997; Levin,

2000; Mitra, 2001; Rudduck, Day, & Wallace, 1997; Thorkildsen, 1994).

Through open conversations about injustices in schools, student voice can

raise equity issues that tend to get swept under the rug by administrators

and other adults in the school who would rather avoid controversy. By

involving students-and particularly students failing subjects or rarely

attending school-school personnel cannot easily shift the blame of failure

onto the students. Instead they must assess the problems within the school's

structure and culture (Fine, 1991; Mitra, 2003; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith,

Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989).

Research also suggests that participation in student voice efforts can

benefit the young people who participate in many ways. Hardly any studies

exist that examine student experiences and outcomes when they participate

in schoolwide decision making and change efforts. One of the few studies

that looked at student experiences in schoolwide change efforts took place

in Canada. The Manitoba School Improvement program found a

correlation between an increase in student voice in the school culture and

an increase in school attachment. Students who had been sullen and

unreachable became some of the most passionate participants in the school

reform process once they became involved (Earl & Lee, 2000; Lee &

Zimmerman, 2001).

Most research instead has looked at efforts to increase student voice and

agency at the classroom level. These studies have found that students

improved academically when teachers construct their dassrooms in ways that

value student voice-especially when students are given the power to work

with their teachers to improve curriculum and instruction (Oldfather, 1995;

Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Research conducted in a middle-school English

classroom in the United States also found that increasing student voice in

schools helped to reengage alienated students by providing them with a

stronger sense of ownership in their schools. Students highly valued having

their voices heard and "honored." Student voice opportunities helped young

people to gain a stronger sense of their own abilities, and built student

awareness that they can make changes in their schools, not only for themselves

but also for others (Oldfather, 1995). Increasing student voice in classrooms

also improved students' understanding of how they learn. Other research

similarly found that by articulating how they learn best, students also can help

teachers do a better job of meeting student needs (Johnston & Nicholls, 1995).

With just a limited number of studies that discuss the effects of student

voice on the school (e.g., Fielding, 2001, Mitra, 2003; Soohoo, 1993) and a

small set of studies that look at increasing student agency within the

classroom (e.g., Arnot & Reay, 2001; Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck & Flutter,

2000), the subject of student voice still requires much more empirical

research and conceptual framing. This article provides some of the first

empirical data on youth experiences in student voice efforts. Drawing from

a broader study of student voice that examined the process and outcomes of

two student groups working to make changes in their low-income,

comprehensive high school, this article helps to fill two gaps in the

literature. First, it offers much needed rich empirical data on how student

voice activities influence the youth participating in these activities. Second, it

provides a theoretical contribution to the field by detailing the usefulness of

a "youth development" framework as a conceptual lens for analyzing

student voice activities.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN A

SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

This article focuses on school change efforts in which youth and adults

working together on shared activities. The study has its roots in sociocultural

(Rogoff, 1990) and situative (Greeno & MMAP, 1998; Lave, 1988; Lave &

Wenger, 1991) perspectives, which premise that we learn and become who

we are through interaction with others. The article is premised on the

concept that learning is inherently a social activity that occurs between

people rather than just as an individual process. As groups continue to chase

an ever-transient notion of collective identity, persons within the group

simultaneously work to connect their own identities and understandings

with the group. Experienced members assist novice colleagues so that the

less experienced members move beyond their current capabilities to learn

new tasks and acquire more sophisticated skills (Vygotsky, 1978).

In the context of this study, learning and meaning making occur through

the process of students and teachers developing together an alternative

frame for student participation in school reform. Students working with

teachers and administrators to co-create the path of reform could help

youth to meet their own developmental needs and could strengthen

student ownership of the change process (Sarason, 1996). Specifically,

student voice activities can increase specific youth development needs,

including providing opportunities to influence issues that matter to them

(Costello, Toles, Spielberger, & Wynn, 2000; Pittman, Irby & Ferber, 2000);

to engage in actively solving problems (Fielding, 2001; Goodwillie, 1993;

Takanishi, 1993); to develop closer and more intimate connection with

adults and with peers (McLaughlin, 1999; Pittman & Wright, 1991;

Takanishi, 1993); to assume more active classroom roles (Costello, Toles,

Spielberger, & Wynn, 2000); and to increase their sense of agency and voice

(Costello et al., 2000; McLaughlin, 1999; Pittman & Wright, 1991).

This article analyzes how student voice activities at Whitman did in fact

enhance youth development outcomes. This research draws upon three

concepts to understand youth experiences in student voice-agency,

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Table 1. Definitions of youth development assets

Youth Development Asset Conceptual Defnition

Agency Acting or exerting influence and power in a given

situation

Belonging Developing meaningful relationships with other

students and adults and having a role at the school

Competence Developing new abilities and being appreciated for

one's talents

belonging, and competence. Referred to informally by some youth

development researchers and advocates as the "ABC's" of youth development

(Carver, 1997), the choice of using the concepts "agency, belonging

and competence" to reflect youth development outcomes derives from

research in both psychology and youth development fields. It is based on the

assets that youth need to succeed in school and in their lives overall. Table 1

provides a summary of these three components of youth development,

including a brief definition of each term and the specific ways that youth

embodied these assets as the engaged in their student voice activities.

Research in developmental psychology finds agency, belonging and

competence to be necessary factors for adolescents to remain motivated in

school and to achieve academic success (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield,

Buchanan, et al., 1993; Goodenow, 1993; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan,

1996; Stinson, 1993). The youth development field does not possess a

consistent set of assets that youth need to acquire to be prepared for the

future and to navigate their current situations. However, descriptions of

youth assets in other research focusing on youth development consist of

similar types of capacities, including "autonomy, belonging, and competence"

(Schapps, Watson, & Lewis, 1997); "self-worth, belonging and

competence" (Kernaleguen, 1980); "knowledge, belonging and competence"

(Villarruel & Lerner 1994); "navigation, connection and productivity"

(Connell, Gambone & Smith, 2000); and "confidence and compassion;

connection and caring; competence and character" (National Research

Council, 2002; Roth & Brooks-Gunn 2000).

METHODS

SAMPLE

With little research available on the resurgence of student voice efforts

occurring for the first time since the early seventies, the intent in this study

was to find a best-case scenario of student voice efforts. This research

provided an in-depth explanation of a school that did contain strong

student voice efforts. The research sample is based on representativeness of

the concept of student voice (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), rather than

representativeness of school sites. The goal was to maximize the

opportunities to observe student involvement by choosing cases that most

actively demonstrated commitment to working with students on their

reform work rather than to find schools with a range of student

involvement in reform efforts.2

The study examines the emergence of student voice at Whitman High

School 3 , a school serving families who rarely have a voice in schools in the

United States. Located in a bedroom community in northern California,

Whitman High School serves a community comprised of first generation

immigrants from Latin America and Asia as well as working-class African-

Americans and European-Americans. Half of Whitman High School's

students are English language learners, and half qualify for the free or

reduced priced lunch program.

With the school graduating just over half (57%) of the 1,750 students that

start in ninth grade and with one-third of its teachers electing to leave each

year, Whitman High School staff felt compelled to make changes. In 1998,

Whitman received a major grant to launch a three-year reform effort from

the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), a $112 million

education initiative in the San Francisco Bay area that was supported by the

Annenberg Challenge and the Hewlett Foundation. As a part of deciding

where to focus their reform efforts, the school's reform leadership team

made the unusual decision of asking students what they felt needed to be

improved.

During the time that this research was conducted, Whitman could easily

be considered the trailblazer on student involvement in the San Francisco

Bay Area.4 Many other high schools in the area were talking about wanting

to involve students in their reform work, particularly through interviewing

focus groups of students. After conducting a small sample of interviews and

observations with other schools and after talking with school reform

consultants in the area, it was clear however that although these other

schools indicated an interest in increasing student voice, it was not

occurring at these schools at the time. The student voice effort happening

at Whitman was unusual and deserved to be the sole focus of this study.

Two groups at Whitman engaged in student voice activities-Pupil-

School Collaborative (PSC) and Student Forum. The groups worked in

relative isolation from one another but shared similar goals of improving

the educational process through involving students more directly in reform

efforts happening at the school. While this parallel work of the two groups

perhaps was not in the best interests of making an impact on the school, it

did allow for an embedded case study design that allowed for betweengroup

comparisons.

The group PSC began when the leader of Whitman's reform efforts

hired retired community-college teacher and community activist, Hector

Sanchez, to help improve education for Latino students. Hector recruited

group members informally through talking to students in the hallway and

spreading the news about PSC through word of mouth. His strategy for

creating the group was important since PSC members had little affiliation to

Whitman. They often cut classes, rarely participated in activities, and found

greater importance in their family responsibilities and after school jobs than

their schoolwork. Eight students consistently participated in PSC and

another five occasionally attended meetings and events.

The resounding connection among the PSC members was that they were

all first generation Latino immigrants who understood what it was like not

to speak English and to not understand the subtleties of the U.S. education

system. The group wanted to help fellow Whitman students who were experiencing

the same struggles of learning the language and culture of the

school as they had previously. After engaging in several support activities,

including offering advice to incoming eighth graders and encouraging the

greater involvement of Latino parents, PSC eventually decided to focus its

efforts on what it considered to be the greatest needs for newcomer Latinostutoring

and translation assistance. The group developed a program that

consisted of students who could both tutor their peers and translate Spanish

into English. The tutors waited in the career center for teachers to phone

them for assistance. They would then go to the classrooms and work alongside

the student in class or they would pull students out of class for additional help.

Between two and four tutors were available during each class period.

The group Student Forum began at the same time as PSC. Fourth year

English teacher Amy Jackson selected students to participate in focus

groups on how improve the academic success of ninth graders. Amy

assembled a cross-section of the student population based on race, gender,

academic performance and "clique." Eventually a group of thirty students

(with twelve consistently participating) constituted the group Student

Forum. The young people in the group consisted of a fairly equal mix of

African American, Latino, Asian, and White students and represented a

wide range of school experiences, from youth on the verge of dropping out

to the president of the school's student council.

Unlike PSC's focus on helping students one at a time through mentoring

and tutoring, Student Forum focused its efforts at the organizational level

by seeking student participation in efforts to reform the school and to

institute new school programs and policies. The group sought to inject

student voice into school decision making and to seek ways to make the

school a better place for all students. The group eventually narrowed its

focus to one schoolwide issue-building communication and partnership

schoolwide between students and teachers.

DATA COLLECTION

This study relied on qualitative data collection that continued for more than

2 years. It consisted of interviews, observations of meetings and conversations,

and written documents from both groups. Table 2 summarizes the

data collection for this study, including data gathered from the students and

the adult advisor of Student Forum and Parent School Collaborative (PSC)

as well as interviews with the head of the school's reform efforts, guidance

counselor Sean Martin, and with teachers and students who were not

directly involved in the student voice efforts. As the table indicates, the data

collection was distributed throughout the timeframe of the study. All

students and adults who participated regularly with the two groups were

interviewed at least twice' and if possible three times (spring and fall of

1999, spring of 2000, and fall of 2000). Interviews were not conducted if the

person was no longer at the school or no longer an active participant of

student voice activities. Because this article traces the development of youth,

I did not use student data for this article if I was not able to conduct at least

two interviews with this person. I also conducted interviews with teachers

and students in the school who were not directly involved with the groups

and almost all of the students who attended the groups intermittently.

All told, I conducted over 70 semi-structured interviews 6 with student

group members and their adult advisors and a handful of interviews

with school administration, teachers, and students not involved in the

group.7

To understand group process and to observe student experiences

in student voice activities, I also conducted over 50 observations of

both formal meetings and informal conversations. Before and after formal

meetings, I also interacted informally with adults and students in

the groups in classrooms, offices, and hallways. I was present at the

school on average two days a week for half of the school day throughout the

1999-2000 school year. In the fall of 2000, I visited two to three times a

month.8

My purpose at Whitman was not as a participant observer, but rather as

an outside observer. During meetings, I transcribed the conversations

verbatim using a laptop computer and some fast typing skills. I also

made note of unspoken emotions, gestures, and underlying currents

happening during the meetings. I shared these transcripts with adults

and students in the group (with my commentary removed) to learn if I

missed anything in the transcription. I also offered these notes as a way of

"giving back" to them for their generous sharing of their time. The two

groups appreciated having a record of their meetings for their own

purposes.

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Table 2. Summary of number of data collection

Spring and Fall 1999 Spring 2000 Fall 2000 Total

Observations Student Forum: 4 Student Forum: II Student Forum: 10 50

PSC: 6 PSC: 10 PSC: 1

School events: 5 School events: 2 School events: I

Interviews Student Forum: 8 Student Forum: 12 Student Forum: 5 73

PSC: 2 PSC: 19 PSC: 1

Sean Martin: 5 Sean Martin: 7 Sean Martin: 5

Other: 3 Other: 5 Other: 1

Written documentation available from the groups, including internal

documents and those meant for an external audience, supplemented

interview and observational data. The documents indicated what was

valued by the school community and beyond the walls of the school,

including to what extent the student contribution is viewed as a priority.

Since student voice began at Whitman the spring prior to this research,

documents provided key information about what happened prior to the

commencement of data collection. They also provided a way of viewing how

the groups formally expressed their vision and plans to the broader school

community.

DATA ANALYSIS AND CONCEPITUALIZING THE FRAMEWORK

The evidence on youth experience in these two groups was derived from a

grounded theory analysis using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967;

Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which is a qualitative methodology that provides a

process for developing theory that is derived from data that is systematically

gathered.9 Grounded theory is especially useful since it focuses on moving

beyond description to developing theory by making connections, defining

relationships, and looking for patterns of action between concepts derived

from the data. Moving from raw data to conclusions involved a process of

"data reduction" that involved breaking data down, conceptualizing it, and

putting it back together in thematic categories that best fit the text (Miles &

Huberman, 1994).1o

To manage my data, I used QSR Nud\*ist software, a qualitative data

analyses program. The program assists with data storage and retrieval

such that it allowed me to search for patterns in the data and to locate

discrepancies and missing pieces. My coding process included writing the

codes on the transcripts, cleansing the documents for errors and

formatting them for Nud\*ist, importing files into the Nud\*ist program,

and entering in the codes. As a reliability check, I shared excerpts of

transcripts (with all identifying information removed) with three collea660

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gues whom I met with regularly to discuss data collection and analysis

issues. I asked them to look for themes in the raw data and compared my

analysis with their fresh look at the interview data. These opportunities

allowed for an increase in the reliability of my coding as I compared it to

their analysis. It also helped me to notice new themes and ideas that I had

not identified previously.

Through analysis of the thematic categories, I developed an explanatory

framework, or the central phenomenon around which to relate other

categories (Miles & Huberman 1994, Strauss & Corbin 1990). When

identifying patterns in the data, I observed that youth who participated in

efforts to increase student voice showed evidence of marked increases in the

very personal and social assets that youth development researchers assert

are necessary for students to succeed in society. In particular, I noticed a

strong increase in agency, belonging, and competence across the youth

participating in student voice efforts at Whitman. This parsimonious set of

attributes concisely described the ways in which the participating students

had changed and the aspects that young people valued the most from their

work in the two groups.

Little discrepant evidence contradicted these three categories. Studentself-

reports correlated with observational data, the opinions of Amy, Hector,

and other adults working with the two groups, and even with survey data

conducted for a broader evaluation of Whitman's reform efforts. The

interview and observation data indicate how the participating youth (24 in

all) discussed the changes they observed in themselves, including developing

new skills and a more positive outlook on their school and their lives

overall. What was striking about these self-reports was the consistency in the

ways that young people described how they were changing. This is

particularly intriguing since students were never prodded for specific

individual changes beyond the question, "Do you feel that you have

changed as a result of being in this group?" Also noteworthy, the lack of

communication between the two groups did not decrease the consistency in

the changes experienced by students in both groups.

Survey data supported the qualitative data. As a part of this broader

study, a random sample of ninth and eleventh graders at Whitman

responded to the survey. I administered the same survey to students in

Student Forum and PSC as a way to compare youth within the groups to the

broader high school population. Two-tailed t-tests identified the differences

in perception of the groups and of the broader samples. Within this survey,

Student Forum members had a significantly lower sense of social deference

(p =.03) than the average Whitman student, meaning that Student Forum

members felt more comfortable speaking up when they disagreed with a

predominating opinion in conversation. Survey data also affirmed that all

Whitman students, including Student Forum, believed that student-teacher

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relations were in desperate need of repair (p = .62 for Student-Teacher

Respect, indicating that Student Forum shared the same sentiments as the

broader student population on this issue). Survey data additionally

indicated that youth in both groups had a significantly greater sense of

social responsibility (p = .037) than the average Whitman student. Students

from both groups strongly affirmed the statements: "It is important to help

others in my neighborhood, all students should be listened to; and when

someone is having a problem, II] want to help."

To help ensure validity of my analysis, and particularly in the final year, I

shared the youth development findings with Whitman adults and youth by

describing the concepts of agency belonging, and competence and asking

both adults and youth if they felt that these terms captured the changes that

they saw in the youth participating in both groups. Sean, Amy, and current

Student Forum members gave feedback on the Student Forum case. Sean

and previous PSC members gave feedback on the PSC case (Hector had left

the school and I could not contact him after he left). The students in

particular agreed strongly with the framework as a reflective depiction of

their experiences. Adults did not engage in the findings as excitedly as the

students, but they also did not find any discrepancies with my conclusions.

It became clear to me that an academic analysis of their work was my

"enterprise," not theirs. And they seemed to be quite content with that. I

was less satisfied and yet accepted this decision as their choice. Sean Martin

was the one exception, and several times he and I discussed the details of

my findings, the rationale behind them, and the consequences of the work

of the two groups.

EVIDENCE OF YOUTH OUTCOMES

The remainder of this article focuses on a detailed examination of the

development of agency, belonging and competence in the participating

students, including a suggested conceptual definition of each asset and the

specific ways that student voice activities manifest these assets in the

participating youth. The findings also consider how the groups' contrasting

strategies for change influenced the way that participating youth acquired

an increase in agency, belonging, and competence. Correlating with PSC's

focus on improving Latino outcomes by providing tutoring and mentoring

one person at a time, the PSC students' growth occurred in the context of

an improved ability to interact on an individual basis with adults and their

peers. In contrast, Student Forum's attempted system-wide efforts to

change teacher-student relations aligned the group members' improved

ability to interact with organizations and authority. Table 3 summarizes the

findings of the study that will be described in the remainder of the article.

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Table 3. Summary of youth outcomes

Youth Development Asset Ways That Student Voice Increases This Asset

Agency \* Increasing ability to articulate opinions to others

\* Constructing new identities as change makers

\* Developing a greater sense of leadership

Belonging \* Developing a relationship with a caring adult

\* Improving interactions with teachers

\* Increasing attachment to the school

Competence \* Critiquing their environment

\* Developing problem solving and facilitation skills

\* Getting along with others

\* Speaking publicly

AGENCY

Agency in a youth development context indicates the ability to exert

influence and power in a given situation. It connotes a sense of confidence,

a sense of self-worth, and the belief that one can do something, whether

contributing to society writ large or to a specific situation (Heath &

McLaughlin, 1993). The data in this section indicate that students in both

groups demonstrated a growth of agency in three ways: (1) they articulated

their opinions and felt that their views were heard; (2) they constructed new

roles as change makers in the school who could "make a difference"; and

(3) they developed leadership, including an increasing sense of responsibility

to help others in need.

BEING HEARD AND SPEAKING UP

In activities with a focus on student voice, a sense of agency particularly

focuses on the notion that youth ideas are to be heard and respected

(Costello, Toles, Spielberger, & Wynn, 2000). Student Forum member Sala

Jones, one of the student leaders of the group, explained, "Me being a

student, I can really do something. I'm just not an ordinary guy. I have a

voice... My opinion counts and people need to really respect my opinion,

to value it." The students developed a greater sense of self worth when they

felt that people were listening to their perspectives.

Participation in the focus groups and the subsequent analysis contributed

greatly to the development of agency in Student Forum youth. During the

focus groups, students talked about why so many students failed at Whitman.

In subsequent meetings, the students worked in small groups with adults to

analyze the focus group data to find common themes. In these analysis

sessions, teachers often misinterpreted student opinions and the youth

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involved in the analysis set them straight. In one focus-group transcript, the

adults interpreted a student's comments as meaning that she did not see the

value of coming to school. The students in the group explained to the adults

that this interpretation was incorrect-the student was missing school due to

family problems but still wanted to succeed in school. Yet when she did

attended class, her teacher seemed very angry with her for being absent so

often. Ashamed of the possibility of letting down her teacher and also

mentally tired from the problems at home, this student did not want to

engage in a confrontational situation, so she stopped coming to class entirely.

After the focus groups, Student Forum decided to work on what they and

their peers viewed as one of the most pressing problems at Whitman-the

lack of respect between students and teachers. Survey data affirm that all

Whitman students, including Student Forum, believed that student-teacher

relations were in desperate need of repair (p = .62 for Student-Teacher

Respect, indicating that Student Forum shared the same sentiments as the

broader student population on this issue). Thus, Student Forum focused its

work on building partnerships between students and teachers. Their

strategy for accomplishing this involved students participating in "teacherdriven"

activities such as the focus groups. The group also developed

"student-driven" activities to help teachers to gain a better understanding

of student perspectives. 1'

In their first attempt at a student-focused activity, pairs of students took

teachers on tours of their neighborhood. In the words of one student tour

guide, "They [teachers] learned where we lived, worked, the different

territories, where we stay away from, where people get killed and hurt for

being in the wrong areas." As a second student-focused activity, the group

wanted to create a schoolwide conversation about Whitman's reputation as

a "ghetto school." Student Forum member Joey Sampson explained, "So

it's like where does the label ghetto school come from? We wanted to deal

with that directly."

Student Forum youth also increased their sense of being heard as they

noticed that teachers and other adults in authority positions respected their

opinions and listened to what they believed during the student-driven

activities. Student Forum member Joey Sampson explained, "We're not just

people anymore. We're not just students. We aren't just names anymore.

We're actually important and teachers have to listen to us now as they didn't

before. They do now." Student Forum members observed an increasing

willingness to collaborate with students and a deeper growth in teacher

understanding and receptiveness of student perspectives. Student Forum

members and teachers also observed that the student-focused activities

helped to reduce tension between teachers and students, to increase

informality, and to help teacher and students to identify one another as

persons rather than as stereotypes.

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In contrast, however, to Student Forum members' emphasis on others

hearing them, PSC members spoke of an internal sense of feeling more

confident to speak up and to speak out. PSC students' growing development

of agency grew from within as they felt more self-assured and brave enough

to express their beliefs. Mary Mejia expressed this sentiment when she

described a growing confidence in articulating her views. She proudly

commented, "I learned to speak with no fear. I used to be shy." The group's

advisor, Hector, described this development as allowing the students not only

to share what they believed but also to feel that they had the right to have

their own opinions. When asked what he thought was the most important

change in group members, he asserted, "They're free-thinkers now."

Like Student Forum, PSC began its efforts by learning more about

student perspectives. They surveyed their Latino peers to identify the main

concerns that they had and presented their data to teachers and parents.

The experience helped to build confidence in the PSC youth's ability to

speak to adults. Student member Esperanza Hernandez explained, "I think

that it [being in PSC] gives me the guts to say what I really feel-what I

think of what's going on. And it wasn't that I didn't like to. It wasn't just part

of me because I had never before, not on a regular basis. And [now] I can

say what I want to say to anyone. It could be teachers or principals. It just

gives me more courage."

DEVELOPING NEW IDENTITIES AS CHANGE MAKERS AND SOURCES OF

SUPPORT

Most often schools reinforce preconceived expectations of youth and sort

them into categories (Giroux, 1983). Based on these labels, students

develop a sense of self. For example, students slotted as "burnouts" in

Eckert's (1989) famous study develop an identity based on marginalization

and a lack of agency. Student Forum and PSC provided opportunities for

youth to develop positive forms of identification that are normally

unavailable to youth in a school setting. Specifically, youth in both groups

developed new identities as change makers.

Student Forum members actively helped to construct their groups and

worked to influence their schools. After the focus groups, Student Forum

members participated in many other teacher-driven reform activities that

helped to strengthen their sense of agency as they became change makers.

One way they engaged in reform conversations was providing a student

perspective at professional development trainings. Student Forum members

assumed the role in such meetings of interpreting to the staff how

students might receive new pedagogical strategies and materials through

participation in teacher professional development sessions, such as a

training on developing standards-based curricular units. Youth shared

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with teachers how they would receive the new lessons being developed and

suggested some ideas for how to make the lessons more applicable to

students' needs and interests. Student Forum members also shared

personal experiences about situations in which they had experienced

significant learning and those in which they did not learn at all and they

suggested ways that teaching and curriculum could be changed to improve

student learning.

In addition to sharing student experiences with teachers, Student

Forum members also worked to transfer teacher-developed ideas and

jargon into language that their student peers would understand. Student

Forum Member Troy Newman explained his role at the meetings was

"breaking down vocabulary. Some students may not understand, you

know. So we were trying to put it [the rubrics and the departmental

standards] in a way where all students understand. I guess you could say [I

was a] a translator."

Troy also provided feedback on the type of classrooms and teacher styles

that worked best for him. He recalled, "One teacher asked me how do I feel

about teachers and who are we comfortable with. And I told him that a

teacher who is laid back and ... gives you freedom .... And learning

about something as you're going through something."

Students also served as an accountability mechanism during teacher

meetings. Teachers noticed a difference in the tenor of meetings when

students were present. Reform-resistant faculty members were less likely to

engage in unprofessional behaviors such as completing crossword puzzles

during staff meetings or openly showing hostility to colleagues.

Rosalinda Gutierrez, another member of Student Forum, transformed

her role in school from forced compliance in which she attended school out

of obligation to that of change maker. Rosalinda participated actively in the

group, including presenting Student Forum's efforts at local teachers'

conferences and working intently to explain student perspectives to

teachers during staff development sessions. Observations also supported

Rosalinda's key role as peacemaker in the group by smoothing ruffled

feathers and building trust among group members. She explained that

through participation in Student Forum, she believed that she could make

an impact in improving the school:

Now I'm very confident in myself. I know that even if there are people

that I don't like working with, I could still work with them. I'm actually

good at this type of thing-helping others. I know that I can make

changes. Sometimes I used to think that our lives were kind of

pointless. And it's like, you can make real changes. Now it's the school,

and maybe in my career and my adult life I could actually do

something, with a lot of determination and a lot of will.

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Sean Martin, a reform leader at Whitman and advocate for the Student

Forum, observed this transformation in Rosalinda as well, explaining, "I've

seen some people step forward and actually be able to have their voices

heard. Rosalinda comes to mind."

An increase in agency among group members also leads to efficacy. The

group members articulated an ability to define new roles for themselves as

they pushed the school to redefine itself. Student Forum member Donald

Goodwin commented:

Before [Student Forum], I was just another face in the crowd of

students here at Whitman . .. It kind of makes me feel more powerful

now being in this group . . . I think a lot of students don't even know

that when they first come in [to high school] that they can actually do

something . . . that they could actually make a change. And since they

don't know that and something goes bad and they just say, "I'm just

going to drop out of school because I don't like it." We need to let

them know that they can make a change if they put their minds to it.

Donald's growing sense of self contributed to the development of an

identity as a leader in the school.

Rather than focusing on changing the school culture, PSC focused on

making changes for individual students by providing sources of support and

assistance for their Latino peers. PSC initially worked on many efforts at once,

including encouraging greater involvement of Latino parents and hosting

conversations with teachers in the school on meeting the needs of Latino

students. The group also developed a mentoring program to help eighth

grade Latino students assimilate into high school. PSC members traveled to

the feeder middle school to explain what it was like to be a Whitman student.

They also provided translation and advice while counselors scheduled the

middle-school students for next year's classes. The middle school students

expressed great appreciation to PSC for answering their questions and for

translating the course catalog into Spanish for them. Eventually the group

narrowed their focus to one activity-developing a translation and tutoring

program for ESL students.

By engaging in these activities and providing assistance to their Latino

peers, PSC members spoke of noticing an increasing sense of agency in

themselves. Rosa Campos became much less shy and developed confidence

in her ability to assist others and to improve her own life as well. She

commented, "I feel good about myself. I help myself and other students by

giving my opinion of how school is and how hard it was for me when I first

came here [from Mexico]."

The experiences of PSC gave the students involved courage and a greater

belief in themselves. Isabel Calder6n expressed pride in her developing

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ability to help her peers. She stated, "I think it's good for us. The group

makes us do something for others. And for ourselves too . . . I think that I

really have helped others. I have some ideas or something." Mary used

language similar to Isabel's to describe her emotions about her involvement

in PSC. She said, "I'm helping Latinos. I feel like I know something. I can

give my advice and help them . . . I talk, give ideas, be creative [sic], give

support to other people. I feel proud and good about what I'm doing."

GROWING LEADERSHIP

Youth need to practice and to assume leadership roles to prepare for adult

responsibilities (Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 1998). Leadership developed

in PSC and Student Forum members as they learned how to take

responsibility for their group and how to guide others. Student Forum

members increased their ability to communicate the vision of the groups

and to help run the organization. Adults who worked with Student Forum

members particularly noticed a growing confidence and leadership in the

students involved. Adult advisor Amy Jackson commented, "Well, [I've

seen] just a huge leadership blossoming in a lot of them. And an

appreciation of each other, [and] working together in different kind of

groups." Whitman reform leader Sean Martin also noticed a heightened

awareness and agency, even among the Student Forum Members who were

newcomers at the beginning of the year. He remarked, "I think that what

really strikes me is the young kids who came in as freshmen, sat in the back

for two or three meetings, and basically didn't know why the hell they were

there. They have become leaders, and I think that they have a pretty good

grasp of what this is about."

Developing leadership included empowering persons during group

activities and outside meetings as well. Reform leader Sean Martin

explained, "The recognition that [veteran] students have of silent people

also comes to mind. I see Donald and other students outside of class having

conversations with Lata Kumar, for example, who is very quiet. There is a

real sense of respect. I'll see them walk up and put their arms around her

and talk with her outside of our meetings. That's real productive."

PSC members' leadership did not focus on group facilitation or

empowering others. Instead, PSC members spoke of a responsibility to

help fellow Latino students. The resounding connection among the PSC

members was that they were all first generation Latino immigrants who

understood what it was like not to speak English and to not understand the

subtleties of the U.S. education system. The PSC group contrasted

themselves to second-generation students whom they felt did not share a

similar compassion for fellow Latinos. PSC member Esperanza Hernandez

explained, "You have to speak up for those that people don't listen to. Like

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some of the students don't speak up because they don't speak the language

right. I see all those problems, and maybe the teachers don't see them. And

if I know about it, I know I have to do something about it for those people

because they think they don't have the power."

PSC members unanimously articulated an obligation to improve the

situation for other Latinos in the school (and even have an obligation to do

so). Mark Alberto, president of PSC, explained, "When I first came here, I

wish that there would be a program like this to help me whenever I needed

something, whenever I didn't understand. So now if it can help for these

students, it will make it easier for them. And then they will come to school

more." PSC members knew what it was like to struggle in a new school and

a new country because they had been there before.

In both groups, the youth who participated most in each of the groups

displayed the greatest growth in leadership, including guiding the vision

and day-to-day tasks of the groups. These student leaders learned how

to encourage the work of others to ensure that the group completed its

tasks and they helped to maintain the vision of the group by reminding

their fellow members of the group's purpose and by keeping spirits

high. They noticed that their roles in the groups helped them to feel

more comfortable giving assistance to others. Twelfth-grade student Sala

Jones credited Student Forum with teaching him leadership skills. He

commented:

When a person in school asks me a question, no one knows the

amount of joy that I get from being able to give him a straight answer

to the problem. When I can talk to someone in a younger grade, and

really educate them on what's happening in the school and what you

need to do on life, there's no better gratification than to just feel

confident that you helped somebody. Student Forum has helped me

do that.

Not only did they feel more comfortable helping others, but the student

leaders noticed that others also identified these students as leaders and

began to seek them out for assistance. Mark Alberto, voted to serve as

"president" of PSC, noticed:

Some of them [my fellow students] come to us now and ask us

questions about what they need to graduate. They come to me and say,

"Do I need to take this class? How many credits do I need to take?"

... If I don't know the answer, then I say, "Let me find out about it

and I'll let you know." They feel more comfortable knowing that they

can talk to me as a friend and that I know the answer than going to

someone else. They don't know if that person will understand.

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After Mark became a leader in the PSC, he became a resource for his

fellow students, who felt comfortable asking him questions since they felt

that he understood them and would be willing to help them out.

BELONGING

The concept of belonging in a youth development frame consists of

developing relationships consisting of supportive, positive interaction with

adults and peers and of opportunities to learn from one another (Costello,

Toles, Spielberger, & Wynn, 2000; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Pittman &

Wright, 1991). Since youth tend to spend most of their time with peers and

relatively little time in formal or informal socialization or interactions with

adults, opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with adults have

become an increasingly important need for adolescents (Csikszentmihalyi &

Larson, 1984). When students believe that they are valued for their

perspectives and respected, they begin to develop a sense of ownership and

attachment to the organization in which they are involved (Atweh & Burton,

1995). Scholars have found that an adolescent's belonging to her school is

positively related to academic success and motivation (Goodenow, 1993;

Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Ryan & Powelson, 1991).

The data in this section demonstrate that both groups provided

opportunities to foster new sources of belonging for youth at Whitman.

Specifically, youth developed (1) greater connections to caring adults; (2)

greater connections to teachers in general; and (3) greater connections to

the school. When comparing PSC and Student Forum members' shifts in

belonging, the goals and focus of the group once again influenced the

type of growth evident in the youth involved. PSC members focused

more on personal connections, including developing strong ties with

their advisor, Hector. Student Forum members instead talked about

knowing and appreciating the school as a whole, including feeing more

comfortable with teachers and gaining pride and respect for the school as

an entity.

RELATIONSHIP WITH A CARING ADULT

Building connections with adults encourages healthy adolescent development

(Kushman, 1997; Moore, 1997). Students in both the groups realized

the importance of connections with adults as well. Student Forum member

Sala Jones explained the great importance of having adults who care in

high school:

I think that relationships between teacher and student throughout

their high-school career are the most important thing . . . Once you

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have that relationship, you can go to that teacher and you can say,

"That's my friend." And they will listen to your problems, whether it

has to deal with school or family or girlfriend or whatever, any

problem that you have. You can go to them and talk to them. And

they'll give you feedback and they'll be there for you. Just to have

people there for you to support you, you will be successful in anything

you do.

The connection to a caring adult proved to be the strongest developmental

influence for PSC students.

The PSC members developed strong connections to Hector Sanchez,

their advisor. A retired teacher in his seventies, Hector had 50 years of

experience teaching at all levels of the school system. He had worked hard

throughout his life to support Latinos and to help them learn how to

support themselves. Isabel Calder6n stated, "Mr. Sanchez really cares for

education and cares for us. But I know some other teachers who don't

really. They do their job . . . but I don't think they really care." Hector

worked with PSC 2.5 days a week to serve as a self-entitled advocate for

Latino students. He spent his time meeting with PSC members, whom he

called his "associates," both in formal meetings and informally by pulling

persons or groups of persons out of class or asking them to see him during

their free periods.

Building trust is crucial for youth to develop relationships with adults

(Eckert, 1989). The PSC students trusted Hector because he was honest

with them. Mary Mejia described Hector as "sometimes . . . grumpy, but

he says it true. He talks direct, to the point." Ritz Ruiz commented similarly,

"He lets us know straight out what he's thinking. I actually like that, because

not many teachers could do that. They could do it, but they don't like to."

Hector's willingness to speak directly to young people, including telling

them bad news as well as good, created a rapport of respect.

Once this trust was established, Hector worked hard to develop a

mentoring relationship with all of the students who joined the group. He

served as a resource and support mechanism for PSC students who

otherwise did not have many sources of information. He counseled students

on choosing courses, applying to college and acquiring financial aid. Isabel

Calder6n explained, "I found out those things I didn't know before, like the

computer classes at school. I thought they were boring and I'm not going to

be able to understand them. But [Mr. Sanchez was] telling us we should take

those classes because they will help us a lot for our future. Things that I

didn't know, now I know."

Hector offered advice and support that the group members crucially

needed and did not find from adults in the rest of the school. He also

offered strategies to young people on how to improve their grades. Frances

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Ruiz explained, "I have PE. in the morning and I didn't want to go through

all my classes after I ran. [Mr. Sanchez] said that it was better because at the

end I had my mind clear, and then I had history. If they changed to history

in the morning [I was] not going be paying attention because [I was] going

to be sleepy . . . It's helped me. I have a good grade in my history class."

Students greatly appreciated Hector's willingness to provide advice and

information.

Hector also provided advice on personal issues, such as how to

communicate with their parents. Hector helped Mary Mejia convince her

father that she needed to reduce her hours at her job so that she could keep

her grades up. Mary described:

I don't know what to do with my dad, because he wants me to work.

And I know if I work, my grades are going to go down. [Mr. Sanchez

and I], we sit down, we talk. Then we work out: "You're going to tell

your dad this. Okay?" I'm like, "Okay, that sounds good." This is why

I like him. He gives advice. He don'tjust say "Yeah, oh, whatever. Talk

to your dad." No, he gives us advice. Most of them [in PSC], they come

to Mr. Sanchez for help, college, family, or problems. I know Mr.

Sanchez is supportive of me, helps me, tells me, "I know you can do

it." He gives me motivation.

Mary considered Hector's encouragement to be invaluable, and she even

credited his support and belief in her as the reason she passed her

minimum competency exam, something that she had failed once before.

Not all students appreciated Hector's constant guidance, however. Anita

Lozano felt that Hector was too involved at times. She explained, "He was

too persistent. I felt sometimes like he was stalking me or something. Like

he knew my grades and everything. And that made me uncomfortable.

There's just times when I didn't want to be bothered." This sentiment was

rare however. Most students valued consultations with Hector. In a school

where the student to counselor ratio was approximately 400 to 1, Hector

provided advice that was otherwise unavailable to students.

While PSC members spoke constantly about developing close relationships

with Hector, Student Forum members rarely talked about specific

assistance from their adult advisors. Rosalinda Gutierrez was the only

Student Forum member who consistently spoke of relying on Amy as a

resource. Reflecting on what has helped her grow into an adult during her

years at Whitman, she said, "You get information, you get knowledge, and

you get to be involved with adults from other careers that you might be

interested in. They actually treat you as someone." Beyond support and

information, positive interactions with adults also helped to reinforce and

strengthen Rosalinda's growing agency.

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Observational data indicated that Rosalinda was not the only student who

relied on Amy and other adults involved in Student Forum. Most students

involved did gain advice and information on course selection, plans for the

future, and dealing with situations at home. For example, adult advisor

Amy Jackson provided a sympathetic ear for frustrations and occasionally

offered advice on communication with parents. In one instance, Joey

Sampson told his mother that he was struggling in trigonometry, and she

suggested that he drop the class even though he needed to graduate. Joey

and Amy discussed his concern and worked out a way for him to explain to

his mother the importance of succeeding in high school and going on to

college.

IMPROVING INTERACTIONS WITH TEACHERS

When speaking of building connections, Student Forum members often

spoke of improved relations with teachers throughout the school. As the

group evolved to the goal of "building teacher-student partnerships,"

Student Forum members noticed a greater give and take between teachers

and students so that they mutually understood each other and could take

action to change the school. Joey Sampson explained, "I think the teachers

look at us differently now. Like I kind of like get a little bit more respect, or

I know a lot more of them now that I'm involved with this stuff. Because

they're like 'Oh, you're in Student Forum.' Because you're not just another

punk kid anymore. You're actually trying to do something."

Even newcomers to the group noticed a change in how teacher-student

relationships, as demonstrated in a conversation between two Student

Forum members. Both felt comfortable speaking to teachers in the hallway

and approaching them if they had a concern in class:

Lana: They (teachers) recognize you and they see that you're doing

something. So it kind of makes you feel like better because they're

supporting us and our ideas. So it's not just kind of like, "Oh, they

don't care." We actually find out they do care. And that means a lot.

Marcus: And actually I found out they feel kind of bad when students

don't say hi to them when they walk past them. I always say hi to my

teachers.

Lana: They opened up a lot by telling us what they go through, like

what they've seen and everything, too. So that's helped us learn.

The students began to understand the perspective of teachers more, and

the teachers began to understand the experiences of students.

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Of all of the Student Forum activities, both teachers and students alike

expressed that the student-driven activity of taking teachers on a tour of

their neighborhood provided the most meaningful opportunity for teachers

and students to learn about each other. Students felt that they truly did

come to know their teachers better, and teachers expressed similar

sentiments. During a pizza lunch that included the student tour guides

and some of the teachers on the tour, one of the student tour guides

reflected, "I was in the car with the principal, and we took him right down

the street. We got fifty yards away and he got lost. Now he knows where I

live. I see him down the hall and he says hi to me. He'll go out of his way.

I've seen a lot more of the teachers try to make an effort to say 'hi' and

include students in their conversations." The students at the lunch talked

about engaging in informal conversations in settings outside of the

classroom with teachers that allowed a sharing of fears and dreams and

an opportunity to build connections. They believed that teachers came to

better understand them.

PSC did not develop a strong connection with teachers like Student

Forum did. Rather than building partnerships with teachers, the group's

strategies for change actually increased alienation between PSC youth and

the teachers. Despite teachers voicing support for translation and tutoring

assistance for their students, very few teachers took advantage of the

tutoring and translation service. The tutors expressed surprise at the lack of

opportunities to provide their services in the school, given the large

population of ESL students in the school. To increase participation, Hector

and the tutors decided to inform parents en masse about the program.

They even went further to personally contact parents of struggling Latino

students to see if they would request tutoring services on their child's

behalf. Teachers did not appreciate the tutors communicating to parents

without involving teachers in the process.

Also, the tutors' decided to spread the word about the program to

teachers as well. Yet their method of doing so further increased animosity

rather than improving teacher receptivity, since tutors sent notices to

teachers about which of their students were failing and explaining the

translation and tutoring opportunities that they could provide both during

class and during other times. Some teachers responded angrily to these

notices, commenting that they were too pushy. Others did not respond at all.

GAINING RESPECT AND ATTACHMENT TO THE SCHOOL

Members in both groups displayed a final form of belonging that increased

their connection to the school itself. This connection is critical to adolescent

outcomes because of the links between the literature on school belonging

and academic success. Research indicates that students who are more

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behaviorally engaged in school have greater academic success, regardless of

their at-risk status (Damico & Roth, 1991; Fine, 1993; Johnson, 1991).

While this study cannot prove a difference in academic success of students

in the groups, the data on belonging do indicate the first step in students

becoming more attached to school. Rosalinda Gutierrez from Student

Forum understood the importance of connecting with school and hoped

that Student Forum could begin at the middle school as well. She observed:

"The earlier you get involved, the more students are likely to be interested

and more into school in general. Because that is true . . . the earlier you

start, the more [you become] involved in other groups, and the better you

do in the school." Rosalinda wished opportunities like Student Forum

would be available in middle school as well in order to increase belonging

during those crucial years.

The increasing attachment to the school included a growing pride in

Whitman. Student Forum member Jill Bersola in particular was afraid to

come to Whitman as a freshman because of the negative things she had

heard about the school's "ghetto" reputation. Her participation in the group

changed her outlook on the school, which she explained on many occasions:

When I first came to Whitman, I was like, "Oh no, I have to go to a

ghetto school." [laughter]. Then when I got into Student Forum I

realized that Whitman isn't bad. I learned to love this school rather

than just hating it .... Now, I care more about Whitman .... I feel

I'm more outspoken to defend Whitman .... This year, I'm more

protective of it.

Many other members of the group expressed a similar feeling of pride

during interviews and observations. The experiences of these students

suggest that becoming a critical democratic participant yields a discourse of

emotional pride and protection for public institutions.

In addition to having a higher opinion of the school overall, some

Student Forum members became more involved in other activities in the

school after joining the group. For example Joey Sampson joined the

baseball team and became director of the school play. He commented:

Before I was involved in this (Student Forum) I didn't want anything

to do with school. I came to school, did my work and went home and

didn't have anything to do with it. I think I cut most of my math class,

so I wasn't even at school when I was supposed to be. I started getting

involved in my sophomore year when Ms. Jackson chose me to be in

Student Forum . . . . So I came and it was fun and I worked with

people. I just started wanting to be around school more, started

wanting to be involved in more activities and stuff .... I noticed that

I've got a lot more pride in the school too.

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For Joey, Student Forum provided a hook into the school's culture and

guided him to other opportunities for interaction.

Unlike Student Forum members, PSC youth did not tend to branch out

to join other activities. Instead, they emphasized how unusual even joining

PSC was for them, let alone something else in the school. For example,

Mary Mejia exclaimed, "I was like, no, no .... Being in a program? No,

programs are not for me, clubs are not for me .... But now I'm with Mr.

Sanchez. It is good." In great part due to the support of Hector Sanchez,

PSC was one of her first formal affiliations in the school beyond her

required courses.

PSC also provided an incentive to improve academically. Rita Ruiz found

that participating in PSC gave her a reason to keep her grades up and come

to school. She explained, "I used to have a bad attitude against everyone.

I'm talking about a bad attitude! And then I got involved in PSC and now

everyone makes you laugh. And you actually have a reason to be in school.

If you don't do good in school, you can't help others." Her younger sister,

Frances, also a PSC member, echoed feeling a new motivation to attend

school. She expressed greater determination to improve her grades so that

she would have time to become more involved in PSC in the future.

Hector and other adults working with PSC also noticed that the group

members talked and acted in ways that indicated they had a greater

connection to the school since joining the group. Hector from PSC

commented, "The biggest thing I can say that's come out of it (the

development of PSC) is the personal growth [of the students]. The feeling of

being more a part of the scene, being part of a system, and still not forgetting

their identity. I say never forget that, but why not acquire a second one?

That, to me, has been very, very heartwarming." Rita Ruiz even became so

attached to the group and the school that she offered to return to the school

to volunteer with the group after she graduated from Whitman.

COMPETENCE

Competence in a youth development context consists of the need for youth

to develop new skills and abilities, to actively solve problems, and to be

appreciated for one's talents (Goodwillie, 1993; Takanishi, 1993; Villarruel

& Lerner 1994). By assuming responsibilities in Student Forum and PSC

and enacting decisions that have consequences for themselves and others,

the data in this section demonstrate that participating students developed a

broad set of competencies that helped them prepare for adulthood. The

data in this section describe how youth experienced marked growth in four

specific competencies: (1) critiquing the environment; (2) problem solving

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and facilitation skills to keep an organization focused and moving forward;

(3) cooperating and negotiating with others; and (4) speaking publicly.

CRITIQUING THE ENVIRONMENT

Student Forum youth in particular developed an ability to critique their

environment, including identifying injustices in their school and making

problematic the standard procedures and rules in the school. Sala Jones,

one of group's veterans, asserted:

If I was a student that was not exposed to this type of thing (Student

Forum) ... the knowledge of what goes on within the school may be a

little depressing. But at least I know it. When I was a freshman.. . . I

really didn't understand exactly why some of the things went on the

way they did. And now I understand. But with it comes a lot of

sadness, because it's always sad if your school is sad. At least this is the

best way though-I mean, knowing.

Sala's comments emphasized that he had not understood why problems

existed before, but came to realize that awareness of inequities was

important even if they were difficult to accept and he did not know how

to solve them. Adult advisor Amy Jackson also observed Student Forum

members "getting more of a critical edge and looking at things from a

different angle. . .. And getting a sense of social justice that I think some of

them had definitely already had the seeds of. But giving it a forum for it to

develop and for them to practice using that voice and those skills and that

lens through which to look at their surroundings."

One activity that particularly enhanced the development of critique was

the creation of a schoolwide conversation about Whitman's reputation as a

"ghetto school." Student Forum member Joey Sampson explained, "Where

does the label ghetto school come from? We wanted to deal with that

directly." Student Forum hosted a Ghetto Forum to create opportunities to

openly discuss perceptions of the school and to encourage students to

discuss how the school's negative image influenced their own identities. The

group hoped that by raising consciousness about the different interpretations

of individual identities and their communities, they could build a

collective direction in which the school should move to improve the realities

of student experience.

Student Forum facilitated a similar conversation with all of Whitman's

teachers to learn about how they perceived the consequences of the term

"ghetto" as a descriptor for Whitman. The teachers voiced markedly

different interpretations of the "ghetto" label, including suggesting that

students capitalized on the term to excuse themselves from aspiring to

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higher goals. One Student Forum member demonstrated his growing ability

to analyze the perspectives of others when he reflected, "The teachers use

'ghetto' to lower our expectations. They think we use it as an excuse."

Student Forum members also spoke of the injustices they were beginning

to notice in their classrooms at group meetings. For example, Joey Sampson

talked about hearing students who made homophobic remarks in his

English class and trying to "set them straight" by explaining why

"discrimination against any group was a terrible thing." Despite these

advances, the adult advisors of Student Forum hoped to see even further

growth in critical thinking. Whitman reform leader Sean Martin noted that

although Joey was growing more aware of injustice in some contexts, he still

had much more to learn. He explained, 'Joey sits in an English class where

what goes on is just bogus. It's a lousy form of education, and he's accepting

it. That concerns me. [We] want to have all these kids go into classrooms

and be advocates for a strong education. [We want students to] really

critique their education. And we have quite a ways to go with that." Sean's

disappointment in Joey's lack of outrage demonstrated his hope of

increasing the ability of critical thinking skills in all the members of Student

Forum. He and Amy encouraged students to become aware of problems, to

raise them, and to go beyond identification of concerns to think about how

action could be taken to address them.

Qualitative data demonstrated that PSC members did not have a similar

increase in their ability to critique their environment. Perhaps this is

because critique was not an explicit focus of the group's work. Rather than

deconstructing Whitman's culture, the group instead attempted to help

Latino students survive the current system.

DEVELOPING PROBLEM-SOLVING AND FACILITATION SKILLS

Beyond developing skills to identify what was wrong, students also learned

skills to try to address the problems that they identified. The student

leader of PSC in particular demonstrated an awareness of a development

of problem solving skills in the youth involved. Esperanza suggested that

if other schools wanted to start a group similar to PSC, they would need

to "have a clear decision what they want to do. Start a little group for

ideas, like finding out what is the biggest problem in the school. We

found out here that we have Latinos with low grades and everything, and

we're trying to get ideas, find out what we can do. Depends what problem

they have."

PSC students also developed problem-solving skills through participation

in the tutoring and translation program. Because of the lack of teacher

interest in the tutoring and translation program, the tutors offered

assistance to guidance counselors and office personnel who would

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occasionally utilize the tutoring and translation program. Office personnel

used the students' translation abilities to help interpret for families both on

the phone and in person, and in written materials being sent home to

parents by the office or by teachers.

Perhaps the most powerful example of the development of problem

solving skills occurred when student tutor Mary Mejia provided information

and assistance to a terrified parent. A mother called the school speaking

frantically in Spanish and wanted to speak to a counselor. Since no one

could understand her, the office asked Mary to translate the call. She

described the experience by explaining, "You wanted to do something to

help this mother. You could hear her voice almost crying. The mom was

telling me, 'I need help because my little daughter is going out with this guy

and she's cutting classes."' Mary explained to the mother that a counselor

would contact the police and other county services and hopefully help to

find the daughter. Mary's ability to translate the call helped to connect a

frightened mother with community resources that she desperately needed.

Student Forum members learned facilitation skills in addition to their

increase in problem solving. Student Forum Member Sala Jones asserted,

"I've learned a lot about how to run things. Like how to organize things and

how to make sure everything's done and tied up all these loose ends that

always pop up with something. There's always something else that needs to

be done." These facilitation and problem-solving skills that have been

identified in previous research are important capacities that youth need to

develop (Eckert, 1989; Knight, 1982).

Rather than only pointing out problems, Whitman students needed to

learn how to turn frustrations into action. One of the greatest needs of

adolescence is to learn how to influence issues that matter by actively solving

problems and engaging authority (Goodwillie, 1993; Pittman, Irby, &

Ferber, 2000; Takanishi, 1993). The students most involved in the groups

tended to develop an understanding of how to move beyond an awareness

of issues to act on their concerns. PSC member Lana Marcos explained:

I hear a lot of students complain a lot about things. But it's like,

stop and realize that you have power. If you really have a passion to

have things change in order for you to feel welcome, to feel

comfortable here in this environment, and to feel that school is

worth your time these four years, then do something about it. Come

together and do something. I would like for them to feel that they

do have the power and they can get things done. They must come

together, organize themselves, motivate, and say, "Okay, this is the

problem. Now how do we get to a solution?" Instead of this end

place where you just whine and whine and you don't really do

anything about it.

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Lana hoped to help students to move beyond identifying problems to

actually taking action to solve them.

GETTING ALONG WITH OTHERS

All of the participants in the groups emphasized learning social skills, and

particularly they learned how to get along with others. The qualitative data

provide overwhelmingly strong evidence of the development of this ability

in both PSC and Student Forum youth. PSC members talked about this skill

as learning how to cooperate and to communicate with their peers.

Esperanza explained:

Part of starting a group is getting to know each other. Because that's how

you get to communicate with people-and really listen to what other

people has to say. Everybody has to cooperate and do most of the things

together ... . You don't have to like some of the people in the

group, but you have to work with them ... . When you have

communications, you break a lot of barriers. You get to know each other

better, not only by your name, but . . . [by] the differences you want to

make.

Other members of PSC spoke of developing cooperation in similar terms,

such as "learning to communicate with different people" and "how to work

with other students."

One key component of working together was learning to respect the

opinions of others. Mark from PSC discovered that this still was important

to learn. He explained, "I seem to take everything more seriously.

Because most of the time I used to ... take it as a joke . . . when

other people say things . . . I don't think it might be important, but for

them it is."

Student Forum members emphasized the need to overcome personal

biases to become better colleagues. Jaycee Garcia and Rosalinda Gutierrez

learned not to make assumptions about others. Jaycee explained, "I used to

misjudge people ... I don't see other people the same way I used to ....

Because when I got in the group there was a lot of people I didn't know ...

and I [would think] 'I don't like this girl because she's stuck up or whatever.'

Once you meet the person, it's totally different . . . I think that made me

think about that everybody should be treated equal."

Sala Jones learned how to value the opinions of others more and started

to listen more and speak less. He commented, "I learned how to bite my

tongue, I learned how to hear out people a little bit more. I learned how to

facilitate. I mean, these things I take for granted now, that I learned how to

do. And I get so accustomed to doing it but it's taught me probably a whole

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lot more than I recognize right now." Like Sala, Joey Sampson found that

he needed to listen more and control his emotions when he spoke. He

commented, "I used to get in arguments with a lot of people before,

because I have a hard time controlling my anger. I'll start an argument

sometimes just to get in a verbal fight with somebody .... Now I tend to

talk things out more before I get mad at somebody . .. It's just a lot easier

for me to have an actual conversation now than an argument."

By learning how to cooperate and communicate with others, Student

Forum was able to establish a norm of caring and respecting for one

another. Rosalinda explained that in Student Forum, "You know everybody.

And everybody says what they want to say. Nobody says, 'Oh, your idea is

wrong.' We all listen to each other. We are a family." As a result of behaviors

such as not prejudging others, listening more, and controlling one's temper,

meetings became times to exchange opinions, to develop meaningful

relationships with peers, and to learn from one another.

SPEAKING PUBLICLY

In addition to learning to get along with others, nearly all students in both

groups enthusiastically described their growth in confidence when speaking

publicly. The only students who did not mention this area of growth had

already developed this skill before entering the group. The youth in both

Student Forum and PSC spoke of feeling uncomfortable or afraid to speak

initially, but the groups helped them overcome their fears. For example, Mark

Alberto in PSC commented: "You'd never see me speaking in public. That was

not me." Through the practice of making many presentations in PSC and

Student Forum students learned to become comfortable sharing their views

publicly and not to consider such speaking a difficult task. Rosa Campos from

PSC commented, "So now I'm just ... Whenever there's a speech to give in

class, it's a piece of cake for me." Rosalinda from PSC similarly explained, "I

used to be really, really shy, I mean, just shy standing up there. I turned red. I

started trembling. It was just bad. And now it's no big deal." Over time

Rosalinda began to assume responsibility for large portions of the group's

many presentations to adults in the school and in the region.

Speaking to adults was a particular fear for group members at first, but

after a while they felt comfortable speaking to them as well. Isabel Calder6n

explained:

I didn't know how to talk to people, like I do right now. [Then] I came

to the meetings with parents and then I talked to them. I explained

what they could do to talk to the teachers and to know about how their

kids are doing in school. Before I [went] to this, I wouldn't do that. I

think it's good because we've learned a lot.

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One successful opportunity to speak with adults appeared to provide the

groundwork for an increased confidence for future interactions for Isabel

and many of her peers. Even those comfortable with public speaking had

some reservations speaking to adults. Joey Sampson, not a shy person in the

least, also admitted having initial reservations speaking to adults, "I feel

more comfortable speaking in front of large groups of adults. I've always

been like a talkative person, but I was uncomfortable speaking in front of

large groups of adults, especially educators. But now I don't care [who's in

the room]."

DISCUSSION

Efforts to increase student voice can create meaningful experiences that

help to meet the developmental needs of youth-and particularly for those

students who otherwise would not find meaning in their school experiences.

Participating in these groups helped (1) to instill agency in students,

or belief that they could transform themselves and the institutions that

affect them, (2) to acquire the skills and competencies to work toward these

changes, and (3) to establish meaningful relationships with adults and the

peers that create greater connections to each other.

Several aspects of these data on the youth in this study are notable. The

first is the consistency of the three categories across the groups. Second is

the evidence that changes were greater for the youth with a stronger

involvement in their respective group. In other words, the youth most

involved in the groups demonstrated stronger agency, a tighter-knit

description of belonging to the group, and a more profound growth in

competencies than youth who participated in the groups less often.

While these data point toward the potential of student voice efforts, the

consistent findings of agency, belonging, and competence in these students

also help to validate the existence of a core set of youth developmental

needs. In a time when practitioners face growing pressure to emphasize

standardized testing, the youth development frame provides an additional

way to identify important skills and assets that youth need to learn to

prepare themselves for the future and to navigate through current

situations in their lives. Young people in this research consistently

expressed enthusiasm, and even gratefulness, for the opportunities that

they had to develop agency, belonging and competence.

The data further indicate that how we structure student voice efforts

greatly influences the ways in which youth development occurs. PSC

attempted to improve the outcomes of Latino students within the system

rather than challenging the system itself. Fitting with this group focus and

the tendency of PSC's advisor to work with students individually, the youth

in PSC demonstrated internal agency, or efficacy, through an increase in

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pride and confidence, a more one-on-one form of building connections

with adults, and a new set of skills focused on increasing communication

with others. Student Forum instead focused their work on broader school

change, including seeking to alter teacher-student relations. The agency

described by the youth in the group focused more on adopting new roles as

change makers. Their belonging related to having a stronger connection to

the school and the faculty. Their new competencies centered on learning

how to critique their environment, to identify ways to address the problems

they observed, and to communicate with others to effectively implement the

change efforts that they designed.

A key component of the structure of student voice activities is the

relationship between the youth and adults who are working together on

these endeavors. My colleagues and I have discussed previously the

dilemma of adult advisors learning how to balance support for youth with

the need to create space for young people to take on meaningful roles and

responsibilities (Kirshner, 2003; Mitra, 2003b; O'Donoghue & Stroebel,

2.003). When adults did not strike a balance between support and letting go,

the groups easily fell back into traditional teacher-student roles. This article

illuminates how the nature of adult-student relations influences the type of

student developmental outcomes that emerge. Hector's attention to

individual relationships helped to foster greater belonging between PSC

members and individual adults; Amy's more collaborative form of leadership

contributed to Student Forum members developing a more communal form

of belonging to the group, to teachers overall, and to the school as a whole.

Overall, the student voice opportunities in this study provided occasions

to strengthen the developmental assets of young people. The two groups

had less success in changing the fabric of schooling so that schools could

better prepare young people to develop agency, belonging, and competence.

Future research pertaining to youth development and student voice

might examine the connections between achieving individual changes

through meeting developmental needs in students and the potential for

organizational changes in school culture. Perhaps when attempting change

strategies that are as counter-normative as student voice efforts, part of the

pathway toward creating institutional change must first be to transform the

persons involved.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR WHITMAN STUDENTS

INVOLVED IN STUDENT FORM (PSC)

Group goals and activities

How are things going in the group? What are you working on?

- [ask about specific group activities happening at this time]

What are the goals of the group?

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- Is it what you expected it would be?

- What do you like best about it? What could be improved?

- Do you think it's made any changes in the school?

- What do your friends think of the group? Your family? The principal?

Individual involvement in the group

When did you get involved in the group? Why did you get involved?

- Why have you stayed involved? What makes it meaningful to you?

- Are you involved in any other organizations in the school?

Do you feel you have changed as a result of being in the group?

Group process

What is the role of adults in the group? The youth?

Ask what group he or she plays?

What types of students does the group involve?

Anyone in the group not involved anymore? Why did they leave?

Anyone leave the group? If so, why?

Do people get along well? What happens when there is a disagreement?

What would happen to the group if the adult advisor was not here next

year? What would need to be done to make sure the group lasted?

How is a decision made in the group?

Changes

What would you tell other schools who wanted to start their own student

voice group?

Other teachers/adult advisors?

So overall what would you say the role of students should be in being

a part of the changes at Whitman?

Notes

I In fact, Michael Fullan (2001) stated that, when writing his third edition of The New

,Meaning of Educational Change, he had considerably more new research about reform to include

in his updated chapters on the roles of teachers, administrators, districts and parents because of

the ways the reform picture has evolved over the past twenty years. Yet he had hardly any

changes to make in his chapter on the role of students in educational change, because, quite

simply, not much has happened. Similarly, Ernest Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation said in the

early 1990s, "Throughout the entire scheme of the [educational] reform movement, students

are rarely mentioned" (quoted in Johnson, 1991).

2 Merton (1987) calls such a research design a "strategic case" that provides the

opportunity for an in-depth examination of an elusive issue. Robert Yin (1994) characterizes a

"revelatory" case in a similar fashion as an instance in which a case can provide insight into

complex conditions and relationships by demonstrating significant aspects of a phenomenon in

its naturalistic state (as opposed to a hypothesized state).

3 All names have been changed in this article.

4 Through participating in the evaluation of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative

(McLaughlin, Talbert, et al., 2000), I had the opportunity to observe and learn first hand about

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the 87 leadership schools who received funding from BASRC. While many schools gave lip

service to the notion of involving students in their reform work, Whitman was the only school

that truly engaged students beyond conducting a survey of their opinions or holding a few

focus groups. I learned about Whitman's work at a conference in which BASRC members

presented their reform work. Whitman chose to share the student voice activities happening at

their schools as a central focus of their change activities. The excitement that the students

inspired in the conference participants was electric. Hands waved in the air as more and more

of the audience of teachers and administrators from other BASRC schools wanted to ask

questions of the students and to participate in the conversation. It was clear that the other

schools in BASRC also recognized the unique nature of the student voice activities happening

at Whitman.

5 I continued to interview the actors in this study on a regular basis until I was

"saturated" with the data. Saturation meant that I had developed a sufficient understanding of

their broader contexts to situate their responses within their frame of reference in the group.

6 My interviews were semistructured. When conducting interviews, my intent was not to

follow a predetermined protocol. I would prepare approximately eight main issues that I

wanted to cover with the interviewee. Appendix A offers a complete protocol used with

students.

7 For all of the interviews, reliability was increased by systematically seeking multiple

perspectives in my research. I tried to understand what was unspoken and to interpret what

was. Gathering multiple perspectives inside and outside the school, including many students,

teachers, consultants, and others provided a clearer picture of events and perceptions of

outcomes, thus improving validity. Additionally, accuracy was increased by recording all

interviews on audiocassette to preserve the words of the interviewees. When I received them

from the transcriber, I would "cleanse" them for accuracy by listening to the tape and

correcting any errors on the document.

8 PSC met weekly on Wednesdays after school. Student Forum did not have a regular

schedule of meetings, but they tended to meet once or twice a month as a large group. For each

large group meeting there was at least one smaller planning meeting. I estimate that I was able

to attend approximately 90 percent of the Student Forum meetings and 80 percent of the PSC

meetings. When I missed a critical event, I collected written documents and interviewed as

many students and adults as I could find to tell me what happened and what they felt about

what happened. In addition to having other responsibilities that kept me away from Whitman,

occasionally meetings would occur, being present for all of the "important" events also proved

difficult because student voice at Whitman did not have a formal "place." Unlike much school

research, I did not have a particular classroom to visit or an office to go to where I could

observe the topic of my study on a regular basis. When I would drop by, the question of where

to go to observe informal interactions of the group proved difficult. Outside of formal

meetings, important conversations happened in the hallways during passing periods or when a

group advisor would spontaneously pull students out of class to touch base. I would position

myself in the book room where PSC's tutors would sit and then find out later that students were

meeting in a classroom on the other side of campus.

9 Theory in this case is defined as "plausible relations among concepts and sets of

concepts" (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, p. 278).

10 Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe the data reduction process as having three steps:

open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. For open coding: Starting with Student Forum

data, I broke down the data into discrete parts, looking for similarities and differences between

events and individual interpretations. To synthesize this initial pass of analysis, I wrote a rough

draft of the case chronologically, taking note of these larger themes throughout the text. I

identified themes in the text and created the first draft of my coding tree and begin to process

documents. After developing the coding tree, I coded all 214 documents and wrote the PSC

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case. For axial coding, I put the data back together to define the relational nature of these

categories by identifying their properties and dimensions (Becker, 1998). This was a helpful

process since coding required re-reading every piece of data I had collected. I wrote the second

case in a more analytic fashion from the start than I did the Student Forum Case perhaps

because I had gone through the process of "binning" data beforehand. After writing the case, I

summarized the data with an analytical memo. I summarized these themes in a memo to what I

felt Student Forum "was a case of" (Ragin & Becker, 1992)-that is, the main contributions of

the case to theory and to understanding student voice at Whitman. Selective coding involved

identifying the central theme around which the other categories fit. This led to the

identification of youth development as the organizing framework for this study.

11 This symbiotic balance of teachier and student fits well with the Vygotskian construct of

novice and expert. Rather than being unidirectional, the work of Student Forum explicitly

states that learning is bidirectional. When students are learning about teachers, the teachers are

the experts. When teachers are learning about students, the students are the experts. Yowell

and Smylie (1999) discuss a similar concept by arguing that all learning is in fact bidirectional.

In student voice activities, the symbiotic relationship is much more explicit, and thus

empowering, for students.

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